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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 005288

DEPARTMENT FOR ARA/CCA AND AID/AA/LAC (PETER ORR)  
ROME FOR THE VATICAN

E.O. 12958: DECL:X6

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CU](#)

SUBJECT: FIDEL CASTRO TURNS 70

¶1. CLASSIFIED BY MICHAEL G. KOZAK, PRINCIPAL OFFICER  
REASON 1.5(D).

¶2. (C) SUMMARY: FIDEL CASTRO CELEBRATED HIS SEVENTIETH  
BIRTHDAY AUGUST 13 AMID CHILDREN AND TOP REGIME  
OFFICIALS IN A PARK FACILITY OUTSIDE HAVANA. DESPITE  
CASTRO S DENIALS OF A CULT OF PERSONALITY, THE  
GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED MEDIA BUILDUP TO THE BIRTHDAY  
LASTED FOR SEVERAL DAYS. AMID THE OFFICIALLY-FESTIVE  
AIR, THE UNDERLYING MOOD HAS WISTFUL, LOOKING BACK TO  
THE PAST, NOT TOWARD THE FUTURE. THE CELEBRATION  
REFLECTS THE DEGREE TO WHICH REGIME SUPPORTERS BELIEVE  
THAT THE FATE OF FIDEL AND THE REVOLUTION ARE  
INTERTWINED. END SUMMARY.

FIDEL CELEBRATES AMID CHILDREN  
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¶3. (U) THE MAIN PUBLIC CELEBRATION WAS HELD IN THE  
NEWLY-RESTORED PALACE OF THE JOSE MARTI PIONEERS, THE  
CUBAN GOVERNMENT MASS ORGANIZATION FOR CHILDREN UNDER  
FIFTEEN. THE PALACE IS LOCATED IN A PARK OUTSIDE  
HAVANA, WHICH MEANT MANY HAVANA RESIDENTS WERE UNABLE TO  
ATTEND DUE TO LACK OF TRANSPORTATION. HOWEVER, THE  
CUBAN GOVERNMENT PROVIDED DOZENS OF BUSES TO TRANSPORT  
CHILDREN TO THE FACILITY (FOR TWENTY CENTAVOS) FROM ALL  
HAVANA S MUNICIPALITIES. POL/ECN OFFICERS WHO ATTENDED  
THE CELEBRATION FOUND A CROWD OF SEVERAL THOUSAND  
CONSISTING PRIMARILY OF CHILDREN ACCOMPANIED BY A PARENT.

¶4. (U) WITH CAMERAS EVERYWHERE, FIDEL TOURED THE PALACE  
FLANKED BY CHILDREN, LISTENING TO ADULT INSTRUCTORS  
EXPLAIN THE VARIOUS FACILITIES: A MUSEUM, GAME ROOM,  
COMPUTER ROOM, ELECTRICAL ASSEMBLY ROOM, EVEN A SMALL  
BAKERY AND LOW-ALCOHOL BEER BREWERY. BOTH FIDEL AND A  
YOUNG PIONEER PAID TRIBUTE TO THE EFFORT OF  
RECENTLY-DECEASED GENERAL SENEN CASAS REGUEIRO IN THE  
PALACE S RESTORATION. FIDEL SPENT ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE

MINUTES IN AN OPEN-AIR COURTYARD IN THE PALACE WHERE YOUNG PIONEERS MADE A PRESENTATION AND SANG "HAPPY BIRTHDAY," AFTER WHICH CASTRO BRIEFLY ADDRESSED THEM.

15. (U) THE PIONEERS PRESENTED CASTRO A STAR-SHAPED CAKE; HE MANAGED TO BLOW OUT MOST BUT NOT ALL THE CANDLES WITH ONE BREATH. A NUMBER OF OFFICIALS ACCOMPANIED CASTRO, INCLUDING BROTHER HAUL (IN CIVILIAN DRESS), VICE PRESIDENT CARLOS LACE, HAVANA CITY HISTORIAN EUSEBIO LEAL, FEDERATION OF CUBAN WOMEN PRESIDENT VILMA ESPIN, HAVANA CITY COMMUNIST PARTY CHIEF ESTEBAN LAZO, COMMUNIST YOUTH UNION (UJC) FIRST SECRETARY VICTORIA VELAZQUEZ AND MINISTER OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT ROSA ELENA SIMEON. FORMER OLYMPIC BOXING GOLD MEDALIST TEOFILO STEVENSON CARRIED HIS YOUNG DAUGHTER IN TO HEAR FIDEL SPEAK.

16. (U) AFTERWARD, FIDEL GAVE AN EXTENDED INTERVIEW TO SEVERAL CUBAN FEMALE JOURNALISTS WHO LOBBED QUESTIONS THAT FURNISHED CASTRO AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT ON HIS HUMBLE YOUTH, HIS DAILY ROUTINES AND THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION. IN RESPONSE TO AN EXCLAMATION THAT HE MUST BE DROWNING IN WORK, CASTRO REPLIED THAT "NOW I DO NOT HAVE SO MUCH WORK," REFERRING TO THE WELL-PREPARED CADRES AND GREATER INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT.

17. (U) THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED MEDIA HAD BEGUN TO FOCUS ON THE EVENT SEVERAL DAYS BEFOREHAND. NEWSPAPERS RAN ARTICLES ON EVERY IMAGINABLE ASPECT OF FIDEL'S LIFE: HIS YOUTH, HIS BOYHOOD HOME, HIS UNIVERSITY DAYS, THE SIERRA MAESTRA, THE REVOLUTION'S EARLY DAYS. THE FRONT PAGE OF THE AUGUST 13 EDITION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY NEWSPAPER "GRANMA" CARRIED A POEM IN HONOR OF FIDEL'S BIRTHDAY CALLED "TIME DOES NOT DEVOUR REDEEMERS" BY JESUS ORTA RUIZ, THE REGIME'S CURRENT POET LAUREATE. THE AUGUST 13 EVENING NEWS SPENT OVER HALF THE BROADCAST ON THE CELEBRATION. THE NEWS WAS FOLLOWED BY EXTENDED EXCERPTS FROM FIDEL'S POST-BIRTHDAY PRESS CONFERENCE AND A DOCUMENTARY ON FIDEL'S LIFE CALLED "ANGEL'S SON" (REFERRING TO FIDEL'S FATHER'S FIRST NAME). THE NEXT DAY, "GRANMA'S" FRONT PAGE FEATURED A LARGE PHOTO OF FIDEL BLOWING OUT THE CANDLES ON HIS CAKE; INSIDE WAS ANOTHER PHOTO SPREAD OF THE CELEBRATION.

CULT OF PERSONALITY? WHAT CULT OF PERSONALITY?

18. (U) DESPITE THE MEDIA ATTENTION, THE OFFICIAL LINE FOCUSED ON A DISINGENUOUSLY-MODEST FIDEL FROWNING ON ANYTHING THAT SMACKED OF A CULT OF PERSONALITY, BUT SIMPLY UNABLE TO RESTRAIN AN ADORING PUBLIC. IN A JULY 20 SPEECH TO THE PIONEERS, CASTRO MUSED ABOUT HIS UPCOMING BIRTHDAY: "REALLY WE HAVE NEVER CELEBRATED BIRTHDAYS, THEY HAVE ALWAYS PASSED DISCREETLY, NOT EVEN MENTIONED IN THE NEWSPAPERS. ONLY RECENTLY SOME HAVE TAKEN THE LIBERTY...OF REMEMBERING SOME OF OUR BIRTHDAYS; BUT WE HAVE ALWAYS RESISTED EVERYTHING THAT COULD BE AN OFFICIAL CELEBRATION; NOR WILL THERE BE ONE THIS TIME." BUT THE CELEBRATION HAD ALREADY BEEN SCHEDULED, RIGHT DOWN TO LOCATION AND TIME: THE JUNE 23 EDITION OF THE COMMUNIST YOUTH UNION (UJC) NEWSPAPER "JUVENTUD REBELDE" ANNOUNCED A "TRIBUTE TO THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF FOR HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY" AT 10:00 AM IN THE PIONEER PALACE.

19. (U) THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED MEDIA DUTIFULLY PLAYED ITS ASSIGNED ROLE. THE AUGUST 11 EDITION OF "JUVENTUD REBELDE" DECLARED ALMOST APOLOGETICALLY "TODAY WE WANT TO TAKE LICENSE...WE KNOW THAT FIDEL WOULD PREFER ANONYMITY, BUT IT WOULD NOT BE FAIR...TO DEPRIVE OURSELVES OF THE JOY OF CELEBRATING HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY." EVEN AS THE HOOPLA REACHED A MIND-NUMBING CRESCENDO, FIDEL INSISTED TO A REPORTER ON AUGUST 12: "MY BIRTHDAY HAS NO IMPORTANCE...SOMETIMES, THINGS ARE BEYOND OUR CONTROL BECAUSE WE CANNOT PREVENT PEOPLE FROM DOING CERTAIN THINGS. I HAVE ALWAYS TRIED TO DISCOURAGE IT...THEY WENT AHEAD AND DID IT. NEWSPAPERS HAVE

PUBLISHED A FEW THINGS ON THEIR OWN." INTERVIEWED AFTER THE PALACE CELEBRATION, FIDEL REMINDED REPORTERS HE "FOUGHT" AGAINST A CULT OF PERSONALITY, GOING SO FAR AS TO PROHIBIT OFFICIAL PORTRAITS OF ANY GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS.

A FOCUS ON FIDEL'S AGE, PHYSICAL SAFETY  
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¶10. (U) THERE WAS PALPABLE OFFICIAL NERVOUSNESS OVER FIDEL'S AGE. ORTA RUIZ'S AUGUST 13 FRONT-PAGE PAEAN PROCLAIMED CASTRO'S ENEMIES "WANT TIME TO CONDEMN YOU TO DEATH...THEY COUNT YOUR HOURS, IT ENCOURAGES THEM TO SEE YOUR WHITE BEARD...YOUR GRAY HAIR DELIGHTS THEM." IN AN AUGUST 12 INTERVIEW, CASTRO ANSWERED A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS HEALTH, INCLUDING HIS DIET, WEIGHT AND EXERCISE. FIDEL ASSURED THE REPORTER HE WAS IN GOOD HEALTH, ADDING "I DO NOT KNOW WHY PEOPLE PAY SO MUCH ATTENTION TO OUR HEALTH. THIS REVOLUTION HAS BEEN MADE."

¶11. (U) IN ADDITION TO AGE, PART OF THE BIRTHDAY HYPE FOCUSED ON CASTRO'S PHYSICAL SAFETY. THE AUGUST 11 EDITION OF "JUVENTUD REBELDE" CARRIED A FULL-PAGE ARTICLE FEATURING INTERVIEWS WITH THREE OF CASTRO'S PERSONAL MINISTRY OF INTERIOR BODYGUARDS. FOLLOWING THE AUGUST 13 EVENING NEWS, A BRIEF DOCUMENTARY ENTITLED "BRAVE AND LOYAL" RECALLED FIDEL'S BODYGUARDS OVER THE YEARS.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: DESPITE THE OFFICIALLY-FESTIVE AIR, THE UNDERLYING MOOD HAS WISTFUL, LOOKING BACK TO PAST EVENTS, NOT TO THE FUTURE. NOTWITHSTANDING OFFICIAL DENIALS OF A CULT OF PERSONALITY, THE CONTINUING OBSESSION WITH THE PERSON OF FIDEL CASTRO STRONGLY SUGGESTS THE DEGREE TO WHICH REGIME SUPPORTERS BELIEVE THAT THE FATE OF FIDEL AND THE REVOLUTION ARE INEXTRICABLY INTERTWINED. THE CELEBRATION OF HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY SURROUNDED BY CHILDREN MAY ALSO HAVE BEEN INTENDED TO SHOW HOW THE REVOLUTIONARY TORCH HAS BEEN PASSED AND ACCEPTED BY YOUNGER GENERATIONS. THE 1994 RAFTER CRISIS WOUNDED THE REVOLUTION'S IMAGE BY SHOWING THE DISAFFECTION OF THE TWENTYSOMETHING GENERATION, THE FIRST GENERATION BORN AND EDUCATED UNDER THE REVOLUTION.

¶13. (C) FIDEL SEEMS -- IN HIS WALK, GESTURES, ETC. -- OLDER THAN HIS SEVENTY YEARS. YOUNGER BROTHER HAUL EASILY OUTWITTED HIM IN A CHILDREN'S GAME PLAYED DURING THE BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION IN WHICH EACH COMPETED TO LIST ITEMS BEGINNING WITH THE LETTER "M": FIDEL STUMBLED AFTER PROFERRING "WOMEN" (MUJERES) AND "MACEISTAS" (INDEPENDENCE FIGHTERS). THESE LAPSES NOTWITHSTANDING, THERE ARE PROBABLY STILL MANY YEARS OF LIFE LEFT IN THIS AGING TOTALITARIAN REBEL.

KOZAK